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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the development and evaluation of an observation guide that draws on qualitative techniques of participant observation and semistructured interviewing to help anyone interested in visiting and understanding schools to develop a "big picture" profile quickly and efficiently. The guide reflects the philosophy of E. Eisner (1991) and his ideas of educational connoisseurship and the five dimensions of schooling. After three pages of introduction and suggestions, the guide is organized into two parts. Part 1 provides structure and space for observers to write notes about their observations while in the school. The guide asks them to note a variety of general information in a way that functions as a semistructured interview and observation guide. Part 2, designed to be completed after the visitor leaves the school, encourages reflection and synthesis of what was learned during the observation into a profile of the whole school. Seventeen people (teachers, students in a master's degree and licensure program, special education administrators, and parents) participated in an evaluation of the guide in use. Fourteen completed only one Visit Guide and three completed at least two. Visitors tended to be reflective and holistic in their descriptions of the schools. For some the Guide was a map, and for others it was a frame. The organization of the Guide directed the observers in particular ways that they felt helped them focus on specific dimensions of the school while constructing a broad picture of its functions. The Guide encourages users to see schools with new lenses and to focus on things they might not have seen otherwise. (Contains 2 tables, 17 figures, and 16 references.) (SLD)

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Seeing Schools Through New Lenses:
A Qualitative Approach to Observing in Schools

ED 410 286

Caroline Moore
Dianne Ferguson

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University of Oregon

Submitted for Publication

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This paper reports the development and evaluation of an observation guide that draws upon the qualitative techniques of participant observation and semi-structured interviewing to help anyone interested in visiting and understanding schools to quickly and efficiently develop a "big picture" profile. The impetus to develop "Taking a Good Look at Schools: A Visit Guide" (Moore, 1995) came from three directions.

As part of her work with the Western Regional Resource Center, one of us (Caroline Moore) was challenged to develop a way for people to visit schools to see good examples of including children with disabilities in general education. It is well-established practice in public education generally to visit the people and schools believed to have implemented some innovative practice to "see it in action." Seeing an innovative practice working in an otherwise typical school is often considered to be a crucial part of the professional development necessary for implementing innovative practices in more and more schools and classrooms. Yet we both had experience with the limitations of such visits.

On the one hand, the untidy nature of schools means that visitors rarely see the setting's best examples of practice. Any day in any school is always "an unusual day," offering the visitor a variety of reasons to find fault with the presumed good example. Even when the usual unpredictability of schooling results in a visitor being able to witness exemplary practice, visitors all too often end up identifying all the reasons why the practice would never transfer to their own school or classroom rather than encouraging the transfer of the innovative practice.

With regard to the innovative practice of inclusion, the other one of us (Dianne Ferguson) had concluded after nearly six years of research (Ferguson, Ferguson, Rivers, & Droege, 1994; Ferguson, Ferguson, & Ralph, 1995) that the most important aspects of inclusion were deeply embedded in the overall practices of effective schooling. Including students with disabilities in the classrooms and activities of general education depended upon general education practices that viewed disability as being just a matter of degree rather than necessitating completely different, and historically separate, teaching practices (Ferguson, 1995:; Ferguson, Ferguson & Ralph, 1995; Ferguson, & Meyer, 1996). Observing inclusion, then, required much more than observing students with disabilities. Instead, the critical features of inclusion lay in the curriculum, teaching, and student assessment practices of general education, supported by an inclusive mission and organization and scheduling practices that could actually provide the necessary supports and services to students with disabilities as they participated in general education.

Our third impetus for developing the Visit Guide was the way in which reform initiatives in Oregon and across the nation increasingly rely on teacher leadership. As Fullan has said, if our growing list of reform initiatives is ever to result in fundamental and enduring changes in schools (Conley; 1993) teachers must experience the changes as coherent rather than fragmented. Well-educated and supported teachers have always been the backbone of school reform. Yet the current reform effort, like previous efforts, has underinvested in teachers (Cohen, 1995; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995). If fundamental change is to occur in schools, teachers must leave the relatively narrow confines of their own classrooms and work collectively to reinvent schools (CASE, 1993; Cohen, 1995; Ferguson, 1995), to "elicit knowledge of others and to understand it when it is offered" (Darling-Hammond, 1996, p.12).

The challenge for us was to develop a way for teachers, administrators, parents, policy makers, community members, or researchers, to *see* these more elusive dimensions of schooling so

- the various dimensions could be seen together, resulting in a "big picture" profile of the school;
- even a short visit of a few hours could provide the observer with a sense of school practices over time, minimizing the effect of the "unusual day" phenomenon; and

- the visitor could reflect holistically about the school's practices, making balanced conclusions about the innovative practice being investigated in the larger context of all the school's agendas and accomplishments.

The resulting Visit Guide, we believed, did have these features, and allowed reflection that translated to the visitor's home setting whether educator, parent or community member. For the preparing teacher, we hoped such a guide might teach reliance on a broader understanding of schools that would serve them throughout their professional careers. For practicing teachers looking at innovations in other schools, we believed the guide would result in a more holistic view of the school than would use of currently available checklists. For parents and community members, the guide's heuristic character could provide a framework for what to look for. We did not originally see the value of the Visit Guide for teachers, administrators, and parents "visiting" their own schools, but have since become persuaded by this use as well as some other more reflective uses of the tool that we will discuss later.

Let us make clear at this point that while there is a variety of ways in which this project was a collaboration, drawing from our work together more than either of us might have achieved separately, one of us was doing dissertation research, the other was a dissertation committee member and research mentor. We decided to write this article together to reflect our collaboration, and we will use the collective pronoun "we" to make reading easier despite the different points in time that various sections were written by one or the other of us. Readers should appreciate, however, that Caroline was the dissertator and Dianne the supporter.

Observation, Perception, and Intuition: Our Theoretical Approach

Arnheim (1964) has written about creating, experiencing, appreciating and criticizing art. He uses gestalt theory to explain why it is not possible to understand art by dissecting the whole and analyzing the parts:

> *For many centuries scientists had been able to say valuable things about reality without going beyond the relatively simple level of reasoning that excludes the complexities of organization and interaction. But at no time could a work of art have been made or understood by a mind unable to conceive the integrated structure of the whole. (p. vii)*

To really understand schools, for whatever purpose, one must see "the integrated structure of the whole."

The Visit Guide was doubly influenced by the work of Eisner (1991): first, its conceptual base and purpose reflect Eisner's notions of educational connoisseurship and, second, we structured the visitor's participant observation around his suggested five dimensions of schooling. He defines connoisseurship as "the ability to make fine-grained discriminations among complex and subtle qualities" (Eisner, 1991, p. 63). It is the "art of appreciation" (p. 68). What Eisner means by appreciation, and what the Visit Guide was designed to elicit from school visitors, is the ability to "experience the qualities" of what is appreciated and "understand something about them." "It also includes making judgments about their value" (p. 69).

Our interest in rich descriptions of schools could only have been borne out through a research approach that emphasizes the construction of meaning by heightening one's ability to receive information through the senses. Eisner's approach to constructivism is deeply rooted in use of the senses to perceive and appreciate the world. An overall interpretivist approach to inquiry, informed by Eisner's connoisseurship and Arnheim's perception, provided an excellent backdrop for a project in which non-researchers were encouraged to use their paper as canvas and pen as brush to create a vivid portrait in words. Ultimately, the field of art played into the data analysis as well, as we will explain later

.The Visit Guide

We designed the guide to be small, relatively unobtrusive, as non-threatening as possible and user friendly. Figure 1 depicts the cover of the 24 page booklet that measures roughly five by eight inches in size.

After three pages of introduction and suggestions, the guide is organized into two parts. Part One provides structure and space for observers to write notes about their observations while in the school. The Guide asks them to notice a variety of general information such as the overall building organization and location of the office complex in relation to classrooms, or "messages" that might give them information about the school's mission and goals, whether they are prominently displayed or only revealed in more subtle displays or practices. This first section of the Guide also includes separate pages to guide observation of at least 5 classrooms, although the user is encouraged to make additional copies of these pages if they have time to visit more. A facsimile of the classroom observation page in displayed in Figure 2. The methodological analog to Part One is the jotted notes and fieldnotes produced by qualitative researchers. In fact, this part of the Guide functions as a semi-structured observation and interview guide, encouraging observers to direct their notice and questions to aspects of the school and classrooms that can generate information related to Eisner's five dimensions of schooling: (1) intentional, (2) curricular, (3) pedagogical, (4) structural, and (5) evaluative (Eisner, 1991).

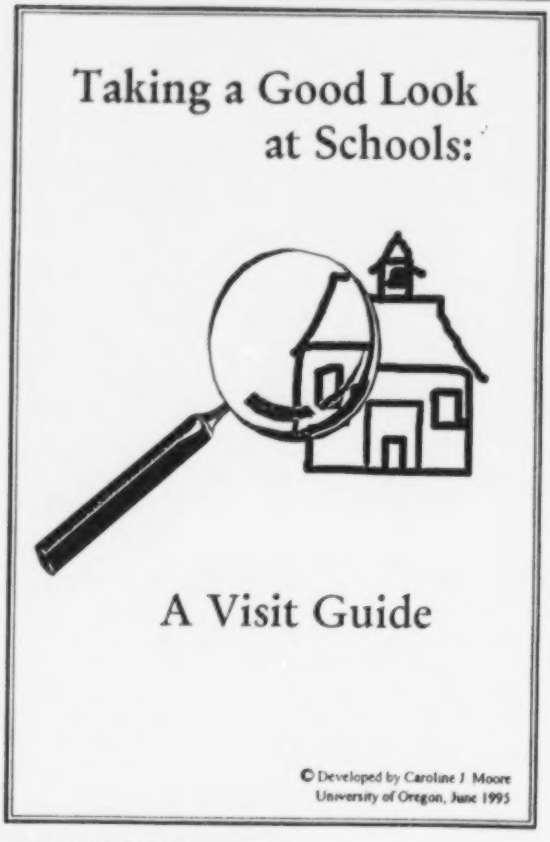

Figure 1: Visit Guide Cover Page

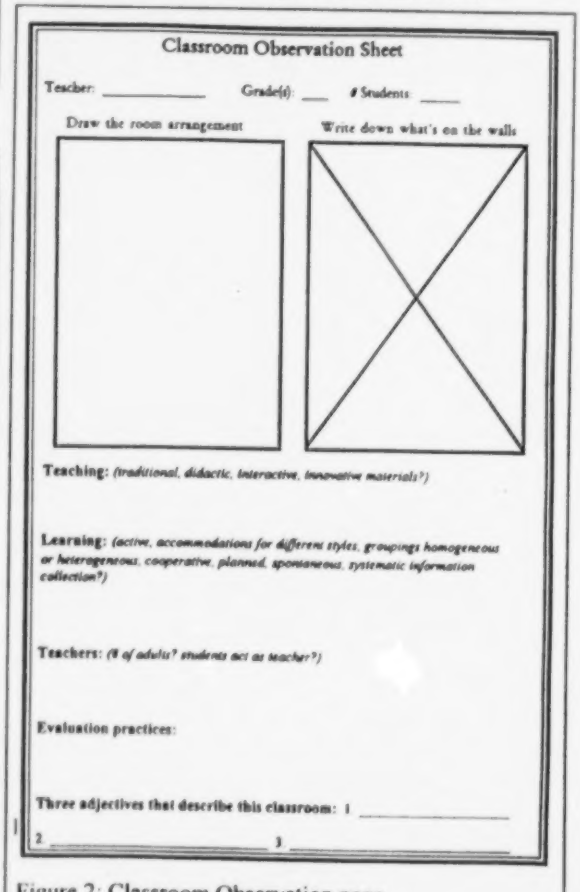
Classroom Observation Sheet
Teacher: _____ Grade(s): ___ # Students: ____
Draw the room arrangement
Write down what's on the walls
Teaching: (traditional, didactic, interactive, innovative materials?)
Learning: (active, accommodations for different styles, groupings homogeneous or heterogeneous, cooperative, planned, spontaneous, systematic information collection?)
Teachers: (# of adults? students act as teacher?)
Evaluation practices:
Three adjectives that describe this classroom: 1 _____
2 _____ 3 _____

Figure 2: Classroom Observation page

Part Two of the Visit Guide, designed to be completed after the observer has left the school,

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encourages reflection and synthesis of what was learned during the observation into a profile of the whole school. For each of the five dimensions, the observer has a page to summarize his or her reflections as responses to three incomplete sentences:

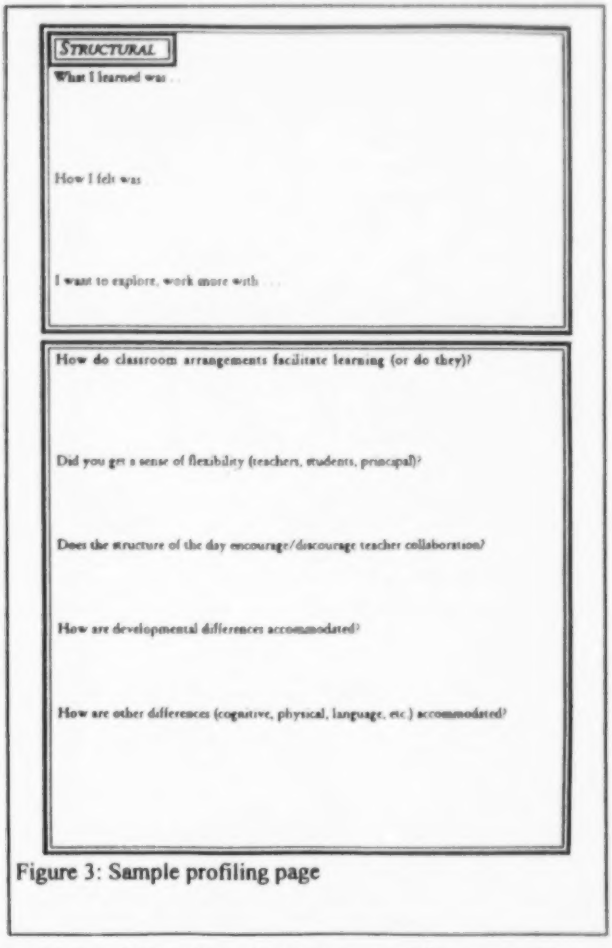
- What I learned was . . .
- How I felt was . . .
- I want to explore, work more with . .

Each profile page is further elaborated with probes that encourage additional reflection about what was learned and not learned about that dimension. Figure 3 depicts one of these profile pages.

In addition, the Visit Guide includes five pages in Part One for notetaking during the observation, one glossary page near the end, and three pages for final reflections and grand summaries.

Evaluating Others' Use of the Visit Guide

Our purpose, then, was to create a heuristic tool that could direct observations of a variety of public education's stakeholders and participants. In fact, we sought to help even the casual observer of schools become an educational critic in the sense meant by Eisner (1991), who suggests the task of the educational critic is "to perform a mysterious feat well: to transform the qualities of a painting, play, novel, poem, classroom or school, or act of teaching and learning into a public form that illuminates, interprets, and appraises the qualities that have been experienced" (p. 86). In a very real sense, the volunteers who visited schools and completed the Visit Guides for the evaluation study reported here were educational critics.


STRUCTURAL
What I learned was . . .
How I felt was . . .
I want to explore, work more with . . .
How do classroom arrangements facilitate learning (or do they)?
Did you get a sense of flexibility (teachers, students, principal)?
Does the structure of the day encourage/discourage teacher collaboration?
How are developmental differences accommodated?
How are other differences (cognitive, physical, language, etc.) accommodated?
Figure 3: Sample profiling page

Eisner (1991) further suggests three sources of evidence to use in judging educational criticism. Structural corroboration "is a means through which multiple types of data are related to each other to support or contradict the interpretation and evaluation of a state of affairs" (p. 110). Thus, our first research question asks, "Are volunteers able to generate consistent descriptive profiles of the schools they visit using the Visit Guide?" Data used for these profiles include observation, informal interviews, demographic information about the schools, written materials such as mission statements, school rules, classroom schedules, messages, and so on. Visitors' profiles were examined to determine how completely they responded to the

requested information, whether the information recorded in Part One of the Visit Guide corresponded to the profile developed in Part Two, and how compelling a summary they developed.

Consensual validation is ". . . agreement among competent others that the description, interpretation, evaluation, and thematics of an educational situation are right" (Eisner, 1991, p. 12). The second research question, "Do different volunteers using the Visit Guide in the same school generate complementary information in their profiles?" was not intended to judge the profiles on their similarities, but, rather, to determine whether the information generated by different visitors to the same school had areas of agreement or overlap and lacked direct contradiction. "One should not expect isomorphism in such exercises. Clearly, critics bring their own background to the scene and have their own particular way of describing and interpreting events. Writing styles also differ" (p. 112).

Our third question, "Do users indicate the Visit Guide enabled them to learn something about the school they wouldn't have seen without it?" draws upon referential adequacy: "An educational critic's work is referentially adequate when readers are able to see what they would have missed without the critic's observations." The answer to this question was based on the visitors' comments as well as our judgment of the portrait they created.

In addition to these three substantive questions about how the Visit Guide accomplished its purpose for our participants, we asked two additional questions. All five questions are summarized along with our strategy for answering them with Visit Guides completed by our volunteer visitors in Table 1.

Table 1: Visit Guide Evaluation Questions

1. Are volunteers able to generate consistent descriptive profiles of the schools they visit using the Visit Guide?	1. Completeness of the information on the Visit Guide.
2. Do different volunteers using the Visit Guide in the same school generate complementary information in their profiles?	2. Degree to which Profiles (Part Two) captured information in Part One, created a picture, and suggested improvements.
3. Do users indicate the Visit Guide enabled them to learn something about the school they wouldn't have seen without it?	3. Level at which different volunteers using the Visit Guide in the same school generated complementary information in their profiles and achieved consensual validation.
4. How do visitors evaluate the Visit Guide for generating information about restructuring inclusive schools?	4. Visitors ratings on a brief survey about the usefulness of the Guide.
5. What improvements need to be made in the Visit Guide in order to make it more useable?	5. Comments made by visitors: unsolicited, solicited by member-checks, and follow-up interviews.

Visitors, Visit Guides, and Artistry

Seventeen people participated in the evaluation. Fourteen completed only one Visit Guide and three completed at least two, including one of us (Caroline). Visitors included teachers, students in a master's degree and licensure program, special education administrators, and parents. The 24 resulting Visit Guides created by the group represented a wide range of writing styles. Judging their value on some artificially imposed criteria did not seem to be in keeping with the framework of art appreciation and perception that originally inspired the Visit Guide. Instead, we sought a way to cluster profiles in a way that captured the uniqueness of both the schools and the visitors. After sorting examples of data from the profiles, characterizing the completeness, tone, and richness of how visitors completed each section of the Guide, and generally pouring over the Guides, we decided to pursue the art metaphor and characterize the profiles according to different artist styles.

We settled upon Impressionist and Post-Impressionist artists as our metaphor source and clustered the profiles into five quite distinct groups. One group of the profiles we characterized as very complete, detailed, expansive, thorough, and straightforward in imagery. These profiles told us a great deal about the school and even helped us actually picture the school. We chose to compare this group of eight Visit Guides to Manet's paintings, which attempt to emphasize their subject without a great deal of expression, emotion, or symbolism (Janson, 1967). Manet's paintings are not devoid of feeling, but they do feature clear and straightforward representations of one-dimensional subjects. The Visit Guide profiles in this group are some of the most thorough and descriptive and place their emphasis on communicating the events and activities of school life.

An excerpt from the Summary page of one of the "Manet-like" school portraits illustrates the style:

> *My overriding impression of this school was. . .that the teachers, staff, parents, students are very much involved together in the learning process here. People seem to work quite well together. Much of the faculty has been steady for some time and are committed to providing quality education. Teachers have described their jobs as "loving it," "the best job in the world." They are interested in expanding their skills. Students are respectful and respected (one morning 7th and 8th grade teachers were serving a special breakfast to them!)*

Another visitor from this same grouping responded this way to the probe about whether or not the school mission reflected acceptance of all children:

> *In keyboarding I noticed a student sitting alone quiet and unnoticed. There are "special" rooms for "special," e.g., LD, students to have their special study hall. I wish the special rooms were not in a separate wing of the school, rather blended throughout the school. Overall teachers seem to teach at one level and therefore miss a number of kids too often.*

A second cluster of six profiles was remarkable for their thoughtfulness, explanation, insight, illustrations, perception, and richness. These, too, conveyed a picture of their schools, but less functionally, and with more feeling. In that sense, they recalled Rousseau's work--bold, detailed, richly descriptive, and appreciative of its subjects. The profiles that fell into this group demonstrated vividly what the visitor "saw" and grasped about the school. Comments were thought-provoking and led easily to interpretation rather than simply narrating what happened, as this excerpt shows:

> *Even some of the teachers one might expect to be traditional in their teaching style, seem to be trying more interactive, integrated approaches. . . . I am impressed to see so many professionals working toward the same goals. Teachers who have been in the business for many, many years are making significant changes with enthusiasm and "grace."*

A second profile from the Rousseau group illustrates the descriptive and analytic nature of the writing:

> *The respect I saw in both teacher and student interaction promotes the school's mission. . . . Class participation and exploration connected student to the subject taught. Humor, interactive, challenging, thought provoking, laughter and respect were all demonstrated.*

Still another group of three profiles communicated a sharpness and emotional intensity that evoked images of Van Gogh's paintings. These descriptions were intense and colorful, even sharply critical or cynical. Some of the artist's paintings are characterized as turbulent and, indeed, the Van Gogh group of profiles elicit powerful reactions with their rich language and emotive imagery, as this excerpt illustrates:

> What I learned about evaluation was... *Most teachers evaluate to get desired outcomes. Administration continues to worry about SAT scores, statewide test scores as a reflection of the school and its staff. Few teachers were really working on innovative ways to assess their students; most just want to make sure the student can give feedback on what was being taught in that class. . . . Students need to memorize subject matter to regurgitate on a test.*

Another profile from the Van Gogh group is extremely thorough and even more sharply critical:

> *There was not a mission statement but what spoke louder and perhaps metaphorically was the progression of wall postings in the front main hall. Entering the building the first thing posted on the wall was job postings within district; the next was warning posters of known sex offenders living in the area; and last a framed copy of the Magna Carta written in old English in illegibly stylized script. One can draw their own conclusions from this. . . mine were all negative.*

A fourth set of five profiles was notable for their terseness and brevity. These visitors captured a feeling for the schools they visited, but they did it with a style that was more abrupt. The picture is there, as it is in Seurat's work, but made up of "systematic, impersonal 'flicks.'" Seurat painted with a more severe approach than other Impressionists; still the effect of his work, like these profiles, conveys a complete image of the subject. A few examples from these Seurat-like portraits will similarly convey a more complete picture:

- *The work groups are fostering collaboration. Many a decision is left to work groups. Some work well, others don't.*
- *Kids are the focus of discussions everywhere...in class, staff room and work area.*
- *...Caring, love and patience are innovative and make a big difference.*
- *Teaching fairly traditional--done in very positive manner.*
- *Some books out of date, need new resources.*
- *Students not taught to solve problems--teachers figure it out for them.*

Two of the profiles were unfinished. Though visitors made extensive notes in Part One of the Visit Guide, for various reasons, they made only a few notes in the profile section. There may have been complete pictures in the mind of the visitor, but we couldn't really assign an artist style because it was less clear what the pictures were. To pursue the metaphor, perhaps these two were "sketches," beginnings of pictures.

The artist groupings helped us understand the range and variety produced in our set of Visit Guides. Just as the artists' works represent quite divergent views of reality, so too our visitors' perceptions eloquently portrayed their unique way of perceiving schools. The groupings also provided a useful scheme for displaying and discussing structural corroboration and consensual validation data results.

Because the Visit Guide was designed to elicit descriptive profiles and to encourage visitors to think and behave like qualitative researchers, our point was not to assess the validity of the tool. It was important, though, that the information collected and the profiles developed be credible. Every visitor saw the school they visited through the lens of their past experiences, expectations, roles with the school, particular interests, and biases. The profiles constructed the truth of each of these perspectives colored by the contextual events of the particular visit day -- substitute teachers, weather, moods, special events and any number of other factors. Each profile bore the signature of its creator, to be sure, but we also expected a believable "soundness" within and across Guides. "The text should...enable readers to

participate vicariously in the events described. That is, it should enable readers to get a feel for the place or process. . . ." (Eisner, 1991, p. 89).

Structural Corroboration

The question was, "Are visitors able to generate consistent descriptive profiles of the schools they visit using the Visit Guide?" To answer, we assessed the structural corroboration of the Visit Guides, by examining each of the 24 Visit Guides to determine how completely visitors filled out requested information, whether the information recorded in Part One of the Visit Guide corresponded to the profile developed in Part Two, and how compelling a summary was developed. As mentioned, two of the Visit Guides did not have complete profiles, so there was no basis upon which to assess structural corroboration, though we included both in the assessment of completeness of Part One of the Guide. We'll return to why these two Guides were incomplete.

Eisner talks about "putting the pieces together to form a compelling whole, one that is believable..." as the "...hallmark of detective work" (1991, p. 110). To determine whether the Visit Guide enabled people to put the pieces together, we examined the Guides to see if all the pieces were included in Part One. Figures 4 through 7 illustrate Visit Guide completeness by artist groups. We examined Guides' treatment of "mission" by looking to see if the visitor wrote down or mentioned the presence or absence of a mission; we noted any indicators of the mission that the visitor noticed even if not in a written form; things seen in the halls of the school that the visitor though reflected mission; things heard about the school that related to mission. Similarly, information about other dimensions were sometimes easily identified according to the structure of the Guide, but could be supplemented by other information recorded elsewhere.

The Manet Group (Figure 4) and the Rousseau Group (Figure 5) both had mostly Very Complete ratings of 4s and 5s for the classroom observations. Some of the adjectives used to describe the profiles of these two groups were "complete, detailed, expansive, thoughtful, explanatory, illustrative." It is not surprising, then, that notes taken on site were very complete. The Seurat and Van Gogh groups (Figures 6 and 7) evidenced less thorough note-taking, but this is also in keeping with styles of "sharpness, emotional intensity, terseness, and brevity." Overall, the Guides were largely complete, with a very few "sketchy" or "incomplete." Regardless of artist group, classroom observations pages were quite complete. The "Unfinished" group (Figure 5) also completed these pages well.

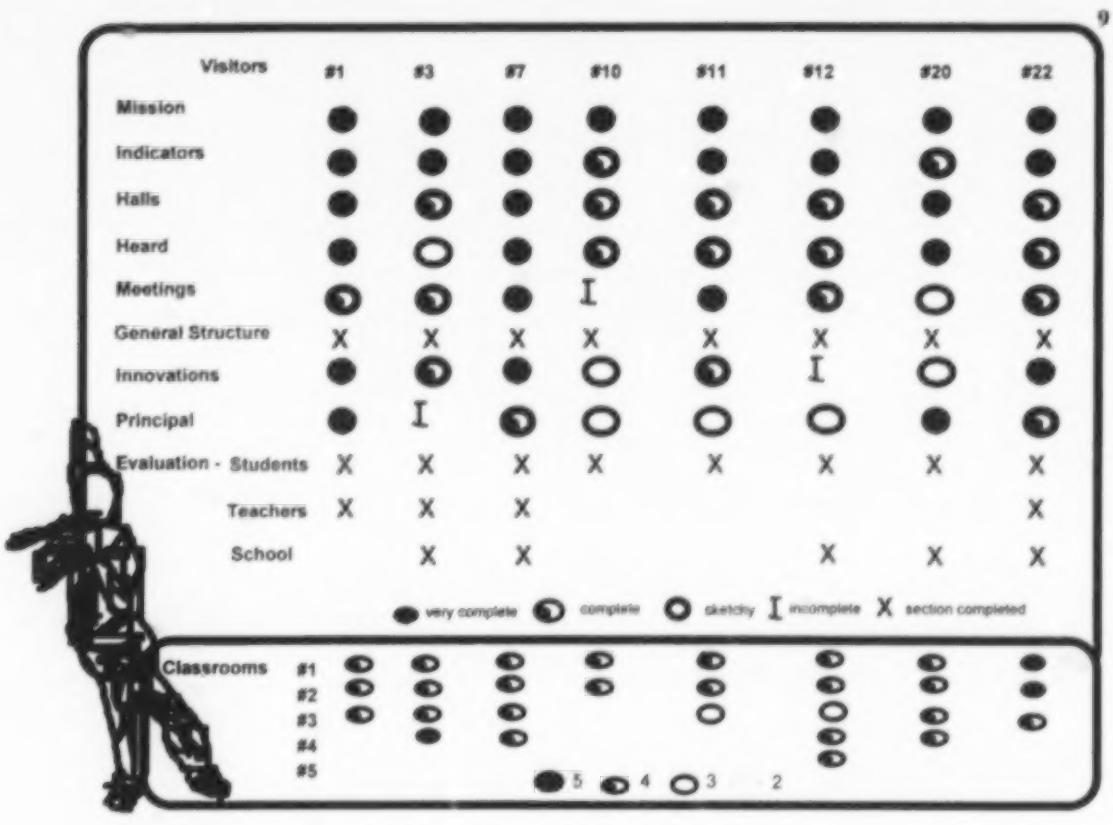


Figure 4: Completeness in Part One of the Visit Guide: Manet Group

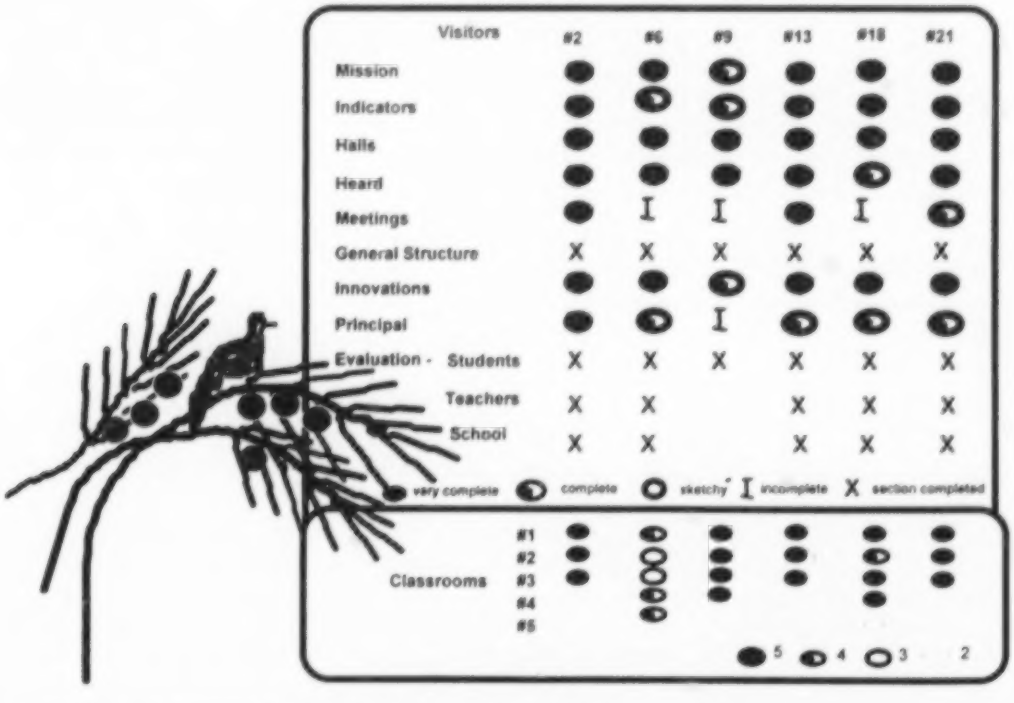


Figure 5: completeness in Part One of the Visit Guide: Rousseau Group

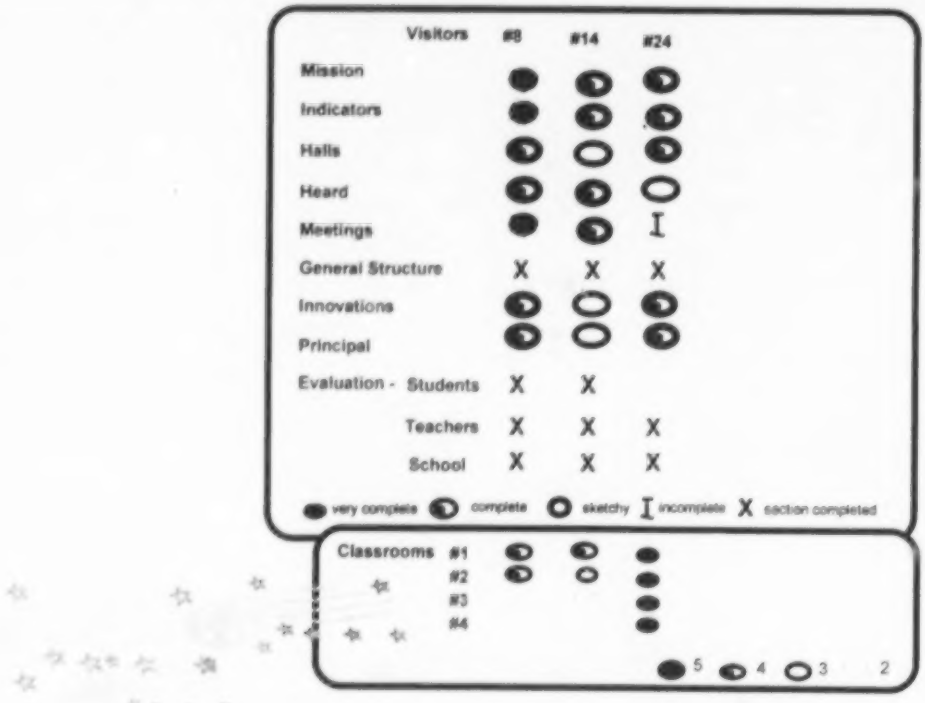


Figure 6: Completeness in Part One of the Visit Guide: Van Gogh Group

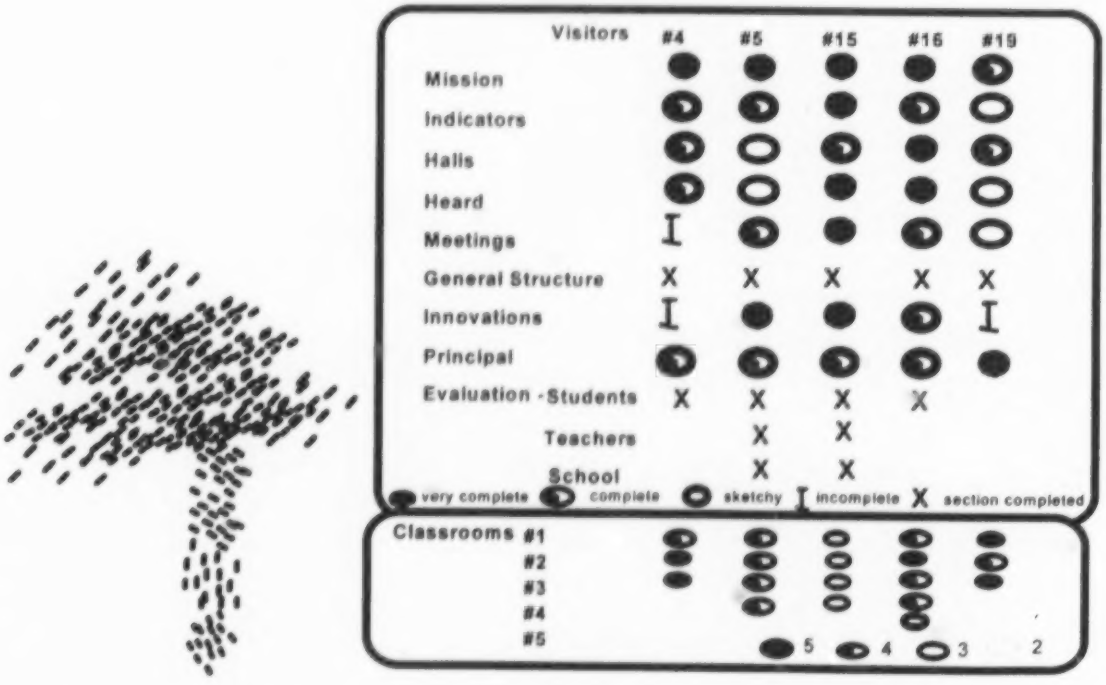


Figure 7: Completeness in Part One of the Visit Guide: Seurat Group

Since the information in Part One is needed to complete the profiling in Part Two, we felt the general completeness achieved by our participants was satisfying and promising. In order to judge visitors' profiles credible, it is important to know the basis upon which they created them: "we seek a confluence of evidence that breeds credibility, that allows us to feel confident about our observations, interpretations, and conclusions" (Eisner, 1991, p. 110). In order to further explore the structural corroboration of the Visit Guides we examined the extent to which the profile developed by the visitor in Part Two matched the information in Part One. In other words, did it "ring true?" Figures 8 through 12 include an overall assessment of the "quality" of the profiles in terms of whether or not they painted a picture of the school.

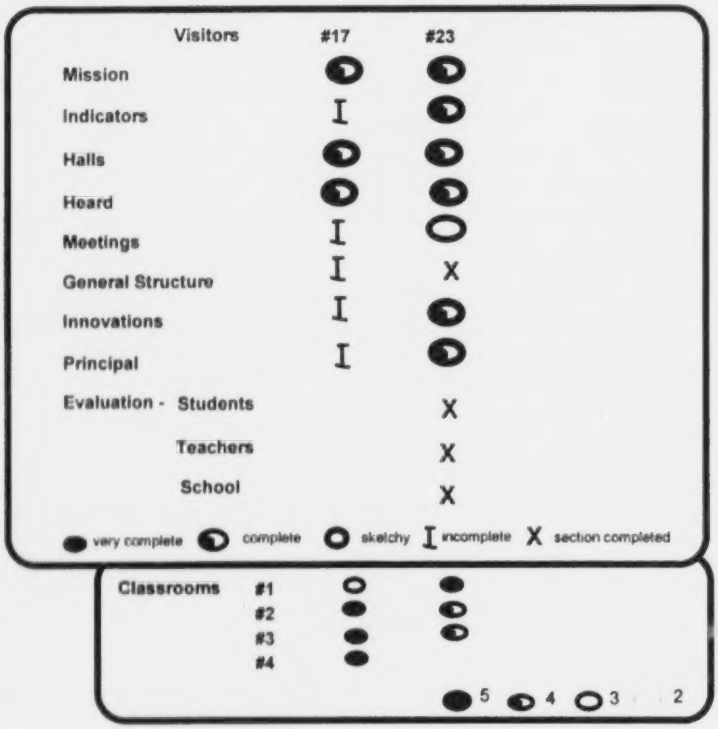


Figure 8: Completeness in Part One of the Visit Guide: "Unfinished" Group

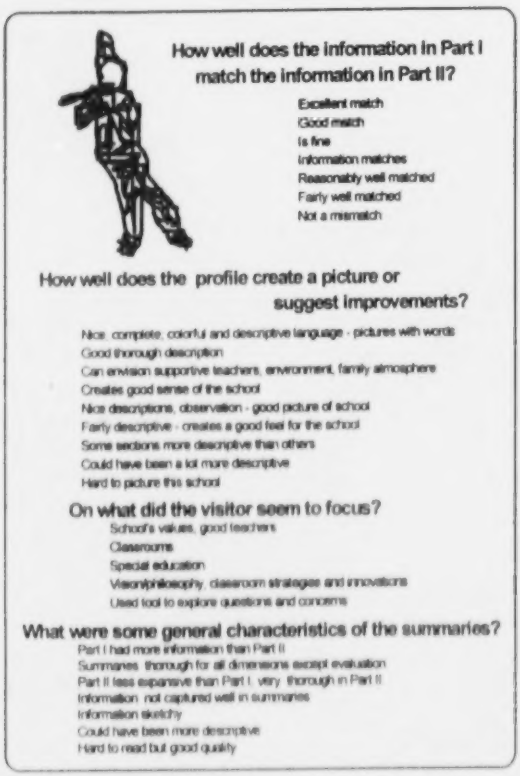

How well does the information in Part I match the information in Part II?
Excellent match
Good match
is fine
Information matches
Reasonably well matched
Fairly well matched
Not a mismatch
How well does the profile create a picture or suggest improvements?
Nice, complete, colorful and descriptive language - pictures with words
Good thorough description
Can envision supportive teachers, environment, family atmosphere
Creates good sense of the school
Nice descriptions, observation - good picture of school
Fairly descriptive - creates a good feel for the school
Some sections more descriptive than others
Could have been a lot more descriptive
Hard to picture this school
On what did the visitor seem to focus?
School's values, good teachers
Classrooms
Special education
Vision/philosophy, classroom strategies and innovations
Used tool to explore questions and concerns
What were some general characteristics of the summaries?
Part I had more information than Part II
Summaries thorough for all dimensions except evaluation
Part II less expansive than Part I, very thorough in Part II
Information not captured well in summaries
Information sketchy
Could have been more descriptive
Hard to read but good quality

Figure 9: Quality of the Profiles: Manet Group

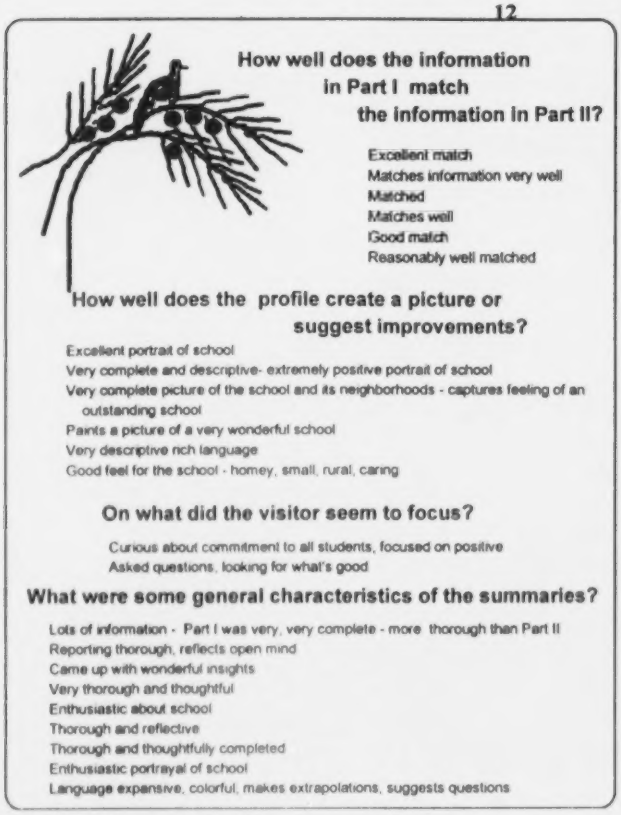

How well does the information in Part I match the information in Part II?
Excellent match
Matches information very well
Matched
Matches well
Good match
Reasonably well matched
How well does the profile create a picture or suggest improvements?
Excellent portrait of school
Very complete and descriptive- extremely positive portrait of school
Very complete picture of the school and its neighborhoods - captures feeling of an outstanding school
Paints a picture of a very wonderful school
Very descriptive rich language
Good feel for the school - homey, small, rural, caring
On what did the visitor seem to focus?
Curious about commitment to all students, focused on positive
Asked questions, looking for what's good
What were some general characteristics of the summaries?
Lots of information - Part I was very, very complete - more thorough than Part II
Reporting thorough, reflects open mind
Came up with wonderful insights
Very thorough and thoughtful
Enthusiastic about school
Thorough and reflective
Thorough and thoughtfully completed
Enthusiastic portrayal of school
Language expansive, colorful, makes extrapolations, suggests questions

Figure 10: Quality of the Profiles: Rousseau Group

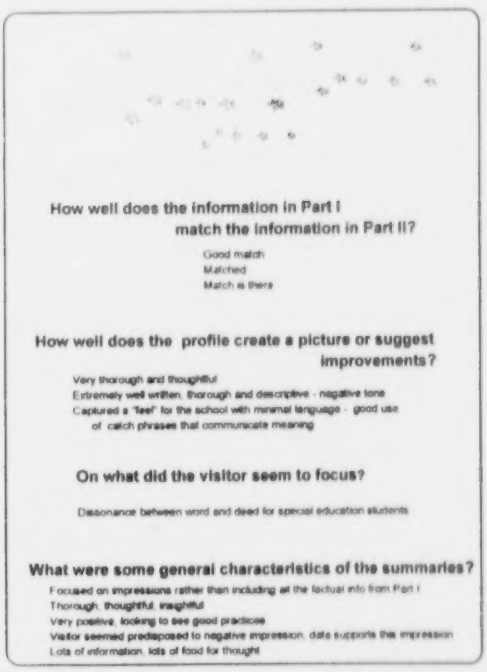

How well does the information in Part I match the information in Part II?
Good match
Matched
Match is there
How well does the profile create a picture or suggest improvements?
Very thorough and thoughtful
Extremely well written, thorough and descriptive - negative tone
Captured a "feel" for the school with minimal language - good use of catch phrases that communicate meaning
On what did the visitor seem to focus?
Dissonance between word and deed for special education students
What were some general characteristics of the summaries?
Focused on impressions rather than including all the factual info from Part I
Thorough, thoughtful, insightful
Very positive, looking to see good practices
Visitor seemed predisposed to negative impression, data supports this impression
Lots of information, lots of food for thought

Figure 11: Quality of the Profiles: Van Gogh Group

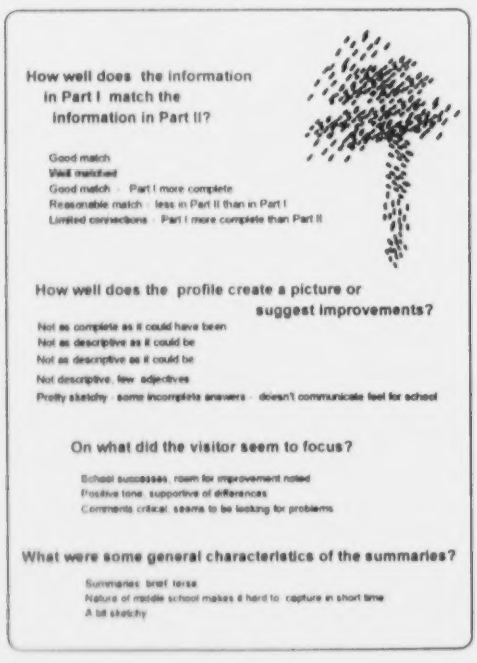

How well does the information in Part I match the information in Part II?
Good match
Well matched
Good match - Part I more complete
Reasonable match - less in Part II than in Part I
Limited connections - Part I more complete than Part II
How well does the profile create a picture or suggest improvements?
Not as complete as it could have been
Not as descriptive as it could be
Not as descriptive as it could be
Not descriptive, few adjectives
Pretty sketchy - some incomplete answers - doesn't communicate feel for school
On what did the visitor seem to focus?
School successes, room for improvement noted
Positive tone, supportive of differences
Comments critical, seems to be looking for problems
What were some general characteristics of the summaries?
Summaries brief, terse
Nature of middle school makes it hard to capture in short time
A bit sketchy

Figure 12: Quality of the Profiles: Seurat Group

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Except for the Manet Group, all of the profiles (Part Two) matched the information in Part One exceptionally well. (The Manet group contained three profiles that were judged only fair matches, but the other five were "reasonable" to "excellent" matches) By way of example:

From Visit Guide #7, in the Manet Group, comments about the Pedagogical Dimension:

Many of the LD folks I work with are generally content with methods of teaching, however, there are times when they feel overwhelmed by a certain class assignment or specific teacher explanation of a problem. I hear these same concerns from regular ed folks as well. Accommodation happens here and there, never perfect, never tragic always. How I felt was...*frustrated by specific teachers' styles and how ineffective they are with SPED and Reg. Ed. Kids. They seem to stand out in the voices of my LD transition students. What's also frustrating is we focus more on what and how is not being effective vs. effective teachers.* I want to explore, work more with...*helping/assisting teachers by providing them with support. Learning how my students learn and passing it off to their teachers.*

This visitor demonstrated the use of evidence ("I hear," "the voices of my students,") to support her contentions about the school. She acknowledged concerns, and also efforts to accommodate differences. She noted future actions she would like to take as a result of the learning from this experience

From Visit Guide #2, in the Rousseau Group, comments about the Structural Dimension:

This school has recently switched to a block schedule this year. Last year the school had only 2 days per week of 90 minute periods; now every day consists of four 90 minute blocks (A-D). This means a year's course could be completed in one semester. This block schedule seemed to benefit both students and faculty with fewer classes breaking up the day. Both said previous year's schedule of 6 or 7 periods was too stressful. Biggest benefit to teachers--verbalized by all--was the 90' prep period they now have. One teacher said she felt students were getting short-changed since she had to cut out some materials (3 weeks' worth) in order to fit into the "rotators" (classes which are normally a semester which are now only 9 weeks and alternate days). I want to explore *how students feel--those I spoke with all said the teachers don't know how to teach in long blocks and mostly lecture.*

This excerpt elaborates both sides of a controversial issue. The visitor had not avoided the controversy, but rather, used the information to formulate astute observations and questions.

From Visit Guide #15 in the Seurat Group, responses to probes in the Curricular Dimension:

What I learned was...*each teacher approaches curriculum in a different way. Collaboration is starting to happen more frequently, though.* How I felt was...*that children are learning in each class. I want to explore, work more with...how collaboration can make learning easier in the area of curriculum. Was curriculum related to school mission? No one even considers school mission when planning content. Connected subject-to-subject? School equally divided between teachers who integrate and those who do not. Fun, exciting, challenging for all? In 3 of 4 classes I saw kids who were having fun, excited and challenged. One of the four classes allows for student-initiated curriculum. Overall, children are strongly encouraged to accept responsibility for their own learning. Respect shown 95% of the time.*

Despite curt responses, informed opinions based on a thorough understanding of the school stand out. Finally, notice how thoughtfully, thoroughly and credibly the following comments communicate.

From Visit Guide #14, in the Van Gogh group, responding to the Structural Dimension:

What I learned was...*the more "accessible" a room is to a student, the more initiative seemed to be taken.* How I felt was...*Good to know that the kids were regarded as responsible enough to handle themselves to a large degree. I want to explore, work more with...Group learning (kids working together). How do classroom arrangements facilitate learning (or do they?) BOOKS! All classrooms were set up with free access to books, reference materials, etc. Teachers' desks were more "subdued," not as intimidating an area as I remember in school.* Did you get a sense of flexibility? *Yes. Teachers (all that I worked with) were very good at "reading the room." I regularly saw activities rearranged, added to, etc. Does structure of day encourage/discourage teacher collaboration? Teachers have time before, during, and after school to discuss issues. <u>All</u> teachers are together for at least part of lunch, and breaks seem to overlap some.* How are developmental differences accommodated? *Multiple methods of learning/teaching tools. Kids can use and manipulate blocks during math, or work without them.* How are other differences accommodated? *Saw multi-lingual calendar charts; ramps; multiple learning-style options; more "advanced" kids were used as tutors.*

From this excerpt, we note that the visitor used observation information extremely well to inform the profile.

Consensual Validation

The second question was "Do different volunteers using the Visit Guide in the same school generate complementary information in their profiles?" We did not intend with this question to judge the profile similarity, but rather to determine whether the information generated by different visitors to the same school was more in agreement than disagreement.

We organized this aspect of the analysis by artists' groups. Figures 13 through 17, situate examples from the Visit Guides for each pair of schools visited by two different volunteers side-by-side. Despite differences in perspective, time, and immediate context, all the pairs evidence remarkable consensus and agreement.

School Visit #3		School Visit #4
Manet	**Fir Grove Middle School**	Seurat
"school is trying" to make it work for all; does "pretty good job making learning available to all"	mission	practices not always good mirror of intent -- special ed staff committed to every student
accommodated in regular class	differences	accommodated "by will of special ed staff"; some teachers tuned in, some rely on aides
"on the right road", group work, hands-on; teachers may be "giving" students too much info (lecturing)	curriculum and instruction	"they have a ways to go"; variety of delivery mechanisms, hands-on mostly lecture, some Q & A
point system, competitive, prohibits enthusiasm, puts emphasis on grades vs. learning	grading/evaluation	mostly traditional grading; special ed kids get good help to succeed
PC viewer and lots of technology	innovations	portfolios in one classroom; curriculum integration in same

Figure 13: Consensual Validation: Visit Guides #3 and #4

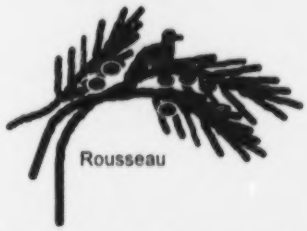
School Visit # 5		School Visit #6
Seurat	**Juniper Elementary**	 Rousseau
actions match words; staff dedicated to meeting needs of all students; saw student-directed activities; blends, cross- class interaction	mission	learning situations fit; self-expression, development, and choice offered in classes; students speaking up, photos artwork evident
tables vs. desks; teaching styles, pace adjust; students included, use aides; neighborhood structure allows choices	differences	classrooms have group stations; neighborhood configuration provides ownership; students in regular classrooms, specialists when needed
different teaching styles meet different needs	curriculum and instruction	teaching techniques vary, all offer structure and exploration
standardized tests used to identify needs; classroom tests assess progress, emphasize strengths; cooperation encouraged	grading/ evaluation	standardized testing important tool, but not good tool to conclude about students' ability or desire to learn; teachers encourage students to use various ways to show they understand material
progressive school; opportunities for success for most students; technology neighborhood concept offering choices	innovations	"proud to be part of it"; group work and problem solving; all staff working together for good of student

Figure 14: Consensual Validation: Visit Guides #5 and #6

School Visit # 10		School Visit #11
Manet	**Chestnut Elementary**	Manet
diversity accommodated by teaching techniques	mission	behavior matches
teachers can structure time flexibly	differences	flexible "most of the time"
curriculum maybe not current, mostly delivered by teacher; some small group work; activities fun, engaging	curriculum and instruction	some curriculum current, some traditional; teacher-intiated, some small groups; focus on real life skills, designed around kids' needs
Token economy; correction for wrong answers; okay to ask for help	grading/evaluation	stars, praise, rewards for certain behavior
flexibility for teachers a plus; more integration could be done better to match mission values	innovations	good school; needs more exciting curriculum

Figure 15" Consensual Validation: Visit Guides #10 and #11

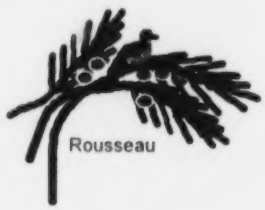
School Visit # 17		School Visit # 18
Unfinished	**Redwood Elementary**	 Rousseau
heard commitment to what is needed for all students, saw it in sets of class art work; student-centered learning environment demonstrated by desks, tables, chairs, level of sinks, etc; student assistance team, big books, timelines, calendars		staff value for kids shows in all actions and interactions; art work and writing displayed proudly; respect for kids shown; cooperation, sharing encouraged

Figure 16" Consensual Validation: Visit Guides #17 and #18

School Visit #16		School Visit #24
Seurat	**Cottonwood K-3**	Van Gogh
saw statement about "deserve to learn, etc." took for mission	mission	saw none; lack of mission mirrored sense of emptiness; lack of direction, suspicion, intolerance
kids integrated into most activities, rules stated positively; teachers discussed how to meet needs of kids	differences	accommodations and modifications historically ignored or resisted
curriculum traditional, even boring, books out of date; some delivery fun, some dull; respect inconsistent; problem-solving needs improvement	curriculum and instruction	some evidence of hands-on learning, but school was involved in preparations for concert, so didn't see much instruction
traditional approaches to teaching and evaluation but messages of support, enthusiasm; overheard one message of harsh criticism	grading/evaluation	evidence of both ineffective and uncaring teaching and effective and caring teaching. Students enthusiastic during concert prep, teachers gave feedback and positives

Figure 17: Consensual Validation: Visit Guides # 16 and #24

The last pair (Figure 17, Cottonwood K-3) posed a particular challenge, in part because one of the visits (conducted by Caroline) was recorded in Seurat-like fashion, using words, phrases, and brief descriptions, while the other (conducted by the district special education director) suggested Van Gogh with its use of intense and critical imagery. At first glance the two seemed different, almost opposite in tone and content. Once aligned side-by-side, however, we found more elements of accord than we expected. There is no question that one of the profiles of Redwood Elementary reflects a distinctly positive view of the school and the other a much more critical view. We guessed that some of this difference might be accounted for by the school's history, which might have influenced the more familiar special education director, and the fact that he visited on a day the school was preparing for an evening concert. Nevertheless, there are areas of overlap and agreement in the two profiles. One saw no mission while the other saw a statement about the school that seemed to reflect mission. One saw very little instruction because of concert preparations, but noted evidence of both ineffective and uncaring teaching and effective and caring teaching. The other saw a mix of traditional, boring, out of date curriculum and some that seemed more fun and enticing. We found it encouraging that two profiles so different at first glance, revealed many similarities on careful analysis.

The Visit Guide was designed to capture an individual's story and to elicit descriptions that bear the signature of the writer. These examples seem to preserve voice while achieving confirmability.

Referential Adequacy

Information about the utility of the Visit Guide emerged from a number of different formats. Several participants volunteered feedback over the phone when called for various reasons related to the process of the project. We both took and reviewed notes taken during a discussions in class by students who had used the Visit Guide. Caroline also conducted several open-ended follow-up interviews with study participants about their use of the Guide and their assessment of its usefulness. Finally, eight participants completed a brief survey about the Visit Guide's usefulness.

Visitors' comments revealed several things about the Guide. First, their statements impart that they did learn something about the schools they visited that they would not have learned without it. It "gave me an opportunity to see a lot;" "it helped me...to see things I should be paying attention, noticing;" it "made me ask why...;" it revealed the "need to spend time in [the] classroom to compare words with actions." Having guidelines, a structure to follow, questions to answer, can give a visitor a purpose and may excuse behavior that might otherwise be viewed as intrusive. Considering the notorious autonomy of the classroom teacher and the sacrosanct nature of the classroom itself, it is quite remarkable that teachers never once objected to visitors observing in their classrooms. It was almost as though the Visit Guide functioned as a "pass" to enter a classroom.

For some people, using the Guide was their opportunity to see what was going on in their own schools, to get new ideas for their own classroom, to better understand the demands and status of reforms. For others, it provided a framework for seeing another school. Table 2 includes a brief sample of the more than 18 pages of comments we collected. We've sampled the range here, trying to strike the same balance we found in the 19 pages.

Table 2: Sample Comments on Visit Guide Usefulness

¥"I feel more a part of my school now that I have used this too. I spent time with teachers (talking to them) but words don't always ring true. Need to spend time in classrooms to cmpare words with actions.

¥"...I feel I really know my school better....Questions I didn't understand, I asked teachers to help me with and I developed relationshs with them I hadn't had before. We made it a problem-solving experience. I saw the teachers using things that interested and motivated students. All the kids were integrated into regular classroom environments.

¥I like where we could draw the rooms because then I could look back and say, oh yeah, that's how she had hers arranged. That was interesting.

¥If I had had this tool to visit [another school's inclusive practices], I could have focused more, known areas to be aware of. Focus, that's what it does: keeps me on track."

¥I'm forced to draw some conclusions and make some analyses about what I saw....You can't walk away from doing that extensive, cogent, thoughtful an analysis of a school and not feel some obligation then to act on it.""

¥"it made sure I didn't miss pieces"

¥"it was a tool for framing before I went in; a bigger way of thinking about what I was seeing"

¥"it forced me to be analytical in lots of ways that would otherwise just be generalized impressions that sort of go nowhere"

Why the Visit Guide Seems to "Work"

We think the Visit Guide is a useful way to see what might be missed without it. It functions well as a relatively quick means for grasping the "big picture" of a school. In closing we will reflect on the various ways the Guide was used and how it was that this variety of volunteers was able to create

their wonderful portraits. We will also speculate about other possible uses of the Guide that we are beginning to explore.

How People See

Michael Quinn Patton, in his book on creative evaluation techniques (1981), offers a theory that may explain how the visitors in this study, as well as others we have watched use it, were able to construct the insightful, sometimes elegant, portrayals of schools they visited. His thinking stems from Michael Inbar's (1979) study of human decision making and problem solving that suggests we typically operate within our own heuristics -- "noncomprehensive decision strategies, such as rules of thumb, standard operating procedures, tricks of the trade, and in some respects even scientific paradigms" (p. 31) -- to make sense of the world. So with no other strategy at hand, visitors to schools typically would see what they went to look for and expected to find. If they had no specific thing selected to observe, they would tend to whatever fit their pre-conceived, sometimes unconscious, notions of schooling. It is "difficult to be attuned and responsive to the uniqueness of each new situation when our programmed heuristics and scientific paradigms are controlling the analytical process, screening unfamiliar data, anchoring the new situation within the narrow parameters of our past experience, and making available to us primarily those approaches we have used most often in other situations" (Inbar, 1979, p. 35).

The visitors reported upon here were supplied with a different heuristic. The Visit Guide encouraged them to move beyond their "autonomic thinking systems and conditioned reflexes" (Patton, 1981, p. 35). They were able to use connoisseurship, "the art of appreciation" (Eisner, 1991, p. 86), to become educational critics, providing constructive written descriptions that might more easily lead to growth and change. At the very least, we were both struck by the breadth and balance in the Guides. We might have expected that these visitors would be more critical in the negative sense of criticism. We have always thought it a curious phenomenon that the first response of observers of schools and classrooms seems to be hypercritical. It's as if we expect whatever we witness needs to be improved, and it is our role to make suggestions. Observers rarely see just very good teaching. Perhaps it is our personal heuristics, and "conditioned reflexes" that cause us to find fault when we witness an educational situation. One way the Visit Guide might be "working" is to help us bracket these heuristics and reflexes so we can see things that might otherwise go unseen.

What People See

The visitors in this study tended to be reflective and holistic in their descriptions of the schools. They saw schools "systemically," and were "analytical in lots of ways that would otherwise just be generalized impressions...." For some, the Visit Guide served as a "map," for others a "frame." Certainly the framework was helpful in encouraging visitors to break out of their normal patterns of observation. But beyond the conceptual framework itself, why were visitors able to capture a holistic view of a school rather than a "slice" or a "snapshot" in time? They were, after all, just visiting for a relatively small amount of time, usually three to four hours with some less and a few extending across several weeks. One explanation may lie with the Visit Guide's emphasis on really "seeing" the school: writing down what is on the walls in the halls, capturing the essence of a classroom by drawing the arrangement of desks and chairs, noticing and recording what a teacher chooses to hang on the classroom walls.

Seeing is a specialized art, often enhanced by drawing. Patton (1981) suggests an evaluation technique for improved seeing, called "picturethinking" -- "a way of SEEing the world and also of helping others SEE the world" (p. 234). Its value is that we use different neurological and perceptual processes (p. 217) when we draw than when we write, opening up new avenues for intuition and interpretation and forcing us out of our conditioned heuristics. Recall the visitor who commented, "I

liked where we could draw the rooms because then I could look back and say, oh, yeah, that's how she had hers arranged."

There is even another, possibly more significant, benefit that comes from the act of drawing room arrangements and noting what is on the walls of hallways and classrooms. That benefit is the ability to perceive a larger time frame than the immediate present. When a visitor draws the arrangement of a classroom, he or she participates in the teacher's decision making process. Unlike watching 30 minutes of instruction, the organization of the classroom offers some perspective, a context. Whether consciously or unconsciously, an awareness grows of how that particular teacher relates to the students, what learning arrangements are preferred, as well as how flexible and creative that teacher is. Further, observing and writing down what kinds of notices, student work, class rules, art work, slogans, aphorisms, and so on are placed on the walls in the room or the school's halls gives the visitor a sense of history. Visitors understand where the school has been and what they are working toward, even though a visit might last only three or four hours. Another reason we think the Visit Guide "works" is because it enlarges time.

By experiencing the school through seeing, drawing, and recording their observations, the visitors were able to pull from their experience to develop holistic profiles that bear the "signature" of the developer and allow the individual's style to come through. They are critical in the "critique" sense, not in the negative sense of the word.

Taking Time to Reflect

The Visit Guide organization and structure directed the observers in particular ways. Some of the visitors commented that they were "forced" to focus on specific dimensions and to answer questions that led to a bigger, more complete, picture of the school. By "forced" they tended to mean that if the structure had not compelled them to do so, they probably would not have completed the profile in Part Two. In this sense, the forcing image is not pejorative.

The sentence-completion nature of the questions in Part Two also appeared to contribute to thoughtful responses. These incomplete sentences explicitly drew visitors' attention and reflections to see what they shouldn't miss and understand what they might not have grasped. Since the Guide is based on effective schools and restructuring literature, the process of using the Guide helps visitors learn about good schools while they see them.

Based on comments of some students that used the Visit Guide as a class assignment, the Visit Guide seemed to function as sort of a "pass" to a classroom or school. Having something in hand may have bolstered the visitor's courage to call and arrange for a visit, knowing that the Guide would provide a structure and possibly a bit of a "crutch." In others cases the Guide provided a reason to enter a school or classroom and write things down. It is very unassuming and friendly in size and style, so school staff don't seem to be intimidated by it -- in fact, as far as we know, no teacher has ever refused to allow a visitor into his or her classroom with the Visit Guide. Some users have reported sharing the guide directly with the teachers. One parent sought help from the teachers she was visiting to understand some of the terminology used in the guide. Others have reported teachers wanting to see what they were writing on and filling out. Perhaps the open-ended nature of the question stems are not only non-threatening, but also serve to allay the almost automatic reactions of suspicion and criticism that both visitors and teachers seem so prone toward.

Finally, the structure of the Visit Guide encourages holistic thinking and writing. In this way it is very different from the kind of checklist format visitors are often armed with, especially when visiting to observe innovative practices. Visitors are encouraged by the Guide to ask and think about why things are as they are rather than rate, code, or check off.

Next Steps and Possibilities

Since completing this study, we have acquired additional experience using the Guide in other ways and speculated on still others. We share three of these new possibilities by way of conclusion.

We have used the Visit Guide with policy makers, often quite distanced from the day to day operations and experiences of schools, to see the nuances of learning experience that are often so important to teachers, student, and parents; but so far from the policy initiative or decision. Teachers taking courses, or participating in workshops, for professional development have used all or parts of the Guide retrospectively to think through the classrooms in their school and gain a larger understanding of the possibilities for action and advocacy planning. Visualizing walking through the various classrooms and hallways of the school helps teachers appreciate not only what they know about the "big picture," but also what they do not know, and might want to discover when they return. We have also used the Guide more than once with the same groups of teachers, asking them to update what they have learned in the interim months between "visits" to their own schools, expanding their own understanding of the overall organization and the developments since their last visit. This has proved to be a reflective exercise that leads to thoughtful analysis.

Finally, we are talking with school personnel about using the Visit Guide as a routine part of their program improvement information systems. It's just early discussion so far, but imagine a relatively small group of teachers, parents, community members and district personnel regularly using the visit guide to feedback a set of purposefully selected perspectives to assist school personnel in their ongoing program improvement efforts.

In sum, the Visit Guide enables users to see schools with new "lenses" and "focus." They see things they wouldn't have seen without the Visit Guide. They generate information that not only creates profiles of their individual schools, but also pictures and themes that cut across schools to teach about inclusion and restructuring. They use words to create descriptive portraits of the schools they visit. They see the big picture.

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